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ABSTRACT

While much research has focused on the processes of marital problem solving, the content of marital problem solving has received considerably less attention. This study examined the initial efforts to develop a method for assessing marital problem solving content. Married individuals (N=36) completed a demographic information sheet, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), the Relationship Belief Inventory (RBI), the Problem Solving Inventory (PSI), and a problem solving exercise. The problem solving exercise sequentially presented three recorded scenarios depicting a marital disagreement about child management, relationship with in-laws, and sex. After each scenario was played, subjects were asked to develop a set of steps for solving the problem using their own relationship as a guide. The results revealed that none of the content variables correlated significantly with the criterion measure totals (RBI, DAS, and PSI), although significant correlations were found with some of the subscales of the DAS. All of the content variables, except the sum of the relevant mean codes for the sex scenario, significantly negatively correlated with the Dyadic Satisfaction subscale of the DAS. The sum of the relevant mean codes for the child management scenario was also negatively correlated with the Affective Expression subscale of the DAS. Multiple regression analyses revealed the content codes to have little in the way of consistent predictive power with respect to the DAS, RBI, and PSI criterion variables.
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DEVELOPMENT OF A CONTENT CODING SYSTEM FOR MARITAL PROBLEM SOLVING

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Summary

In the past decade much research attention has been focused on the processes of marital problem solving. While this line of inquiry has proven beneficial, the content of marital problem solving has received considerably less attention. One impediment to this research has been the lack of a methodology for the assessment of marital problem solving content. Existing schemes for the evaluation of general social problem solving content do not address marital issues (Heppner & Peterson, 1982; Platt & Spivack, 1975).

From a cognitive-behavioral skills perspective, the extent to which an individual can develop a plan for resolving marital conflict is a relevant and crucial component of relationship adjustment. Marital problem solving manuals (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Bornstein & Bornstein, 1986) emphasize specificity of detail and equality of responsibility in developing successful problem solving strategies. At present, however, there is no empirically derived methodology for evaluating content aspects of problem solving.

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This study examines the initial efforts to develop a method for assessing marital problem solving content. The validity of this approach will be evaluated by the ability of content to predict relationship adjustment and differentiate high and low adjustment groups. In keeping with a cognitive-behavioral perspective of individual problem solving skills, the unit of analysis is the married individual rather than the dyad.

Method

Thirty-six married individuals (Table 1) were recruited to participate in the study. They were offered a communication booklet and a chance to win a cash prize as compensation for their participation. Recruitment methods included posting announcements in supermarkets, campuses, and the offices of cooperative marital and family therapists. Data collection was conducted in the subjects' homes.

Subjects were asked to complete a demographic information sheet, three questionnaires, and a marital problem solving exercise. The questionnaires included the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS: Spanier, 1976), the Relationship Belief Inventory (RBI: Edelstein & Epstein, 1981), and the Problem Solving Inventory (PSI: Heppner & Peterson, 1982).

The problem solving exercise sequentially presented three recorded scenarios depicting a marital disagreement about child management, relationship with inlaws, and sex. These scenarios were empirically selected for their ability to discriminate between distressed and nondistressed couples (Rubin, 1977). After each scenario was played, subjects were asked to develop a set of steps for solving the problem depicted using their own relationship as a guide. When they indicated that they had a set of steps in mind, they were asked to

describe these steps aloud while being audiotaped. Finally, each subject was asked to rate how often the depicted problem occurred in their relationship, and how similar the steps they generated were to steps they and their spouse have actually taken.

Coding of the data occurred in a three phase process. Initially, transcriptions of the audiotaped responses were divided into "thought units" using Gottman's (1979) methodology. Approximately three hours of training was involved before coders reached a criterion of 70% agreement.

The second phase of data reduction involved transcript analysis using "relevant means" (RM) and "elaboration of means" (EM) content codes based on Platt and Spivack's (1975) Means-Ends Problem Solving Procedure. Code definitions were modified to conform to the demands of this new application (Table 2). Approximately 40 to 50 hours of training were required before agreement began to reach the 70% criterion for RM codes. EM codes had unacceptably poor agreement and were eliminated from further analyses. Coders also rated the transcript for efficacy and equitable responsibility for behavior change during this phase of analysis.

The third phase of data reduction involved the evaluation of redundant codes and removal of duplications from the final tally. An overall agreement of 77% was reached after only two hours of training.

Results and Conclusions

Statistical analysis of the content data was conducted using Pearson correlations, multiple regression, and T-test comparisons. The data were grouped to yield five content variables: a sum of the RM codes for the sex scenario; a sum of the RM codes for the inlaw scenario; a sum of the RM codes for the child management scenario; a grand sum of the RM codes; and an average for the RM codes used across the three scenarios.

Inspection of the inter-correlation matrix produced mixed results. While none of the content variables correlated significantly with the criterion measure totals (DAS, RBI, and PSI), significant correlations were found with some of the subscales of the DAS. All of the content variables, except the sum of RM codes for the sex scenario, significantly ($p > .01$) negatively correlated with the Dyadic Satisfaction subscale of the DAS. Additionally, the sum of RM codes for the child management scenario was also negatively correlated with the Affective Expression subscale of the DAS.

Multiple regression analyses revealed the content codes to have little in the way of consistent predictive power with respect to the DAS, RBI, and PSI criterion variables. However, the sum of RM codes for the child management scenario was shown to account for 11.5% of the variance [$F(4,17)$ $p < .05$] in total DAS scores.

T-test comparisons were performed after the sample was divided into high and low satisfaction groups on the DAS. None of these analyses produced significant results, although significance was approached with the groups differing in regard to the sum of RM codes used in the child management

scenario ($p > .06$). In this case the low satisfaction group used more relevant means.

This attempt at evaluating the content of marital problem solving is ongoing. The coding system is under revision and psychometric evaluation.

There are a number of areas in which revision and improvement may produce a viable alternative measure of relationship problem solving. First, the lack of interrater reliability for the EM codes deprived the study of data crucial to the conceptual structure of the coding system. Review of this section of the coding system is being conducted with coders in order to better assess these problems. Secondly, casual analysis of the coded data reveals an inconsistency in the application of RM and EM codes as a result of the subject's response structuring. It may well be that this is an artifact of context and that the RM and EM codes can be collapsed into one code to eliminate these inconsistencies.

TABLE 1

Subject Information (N=36)

	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Sex		
Men	16	44.4
Women	20	55.6
Race		
White	33	91.7
Hispanic/Latino	3	8.3
Education		
High School	3	8.3
College	27	75.0
Graduate	6	16.7
Number of Children		
None	6	16.7
One	9	25.0
Two	17	47.2
Three	2	5.6
Five	1	2.8
Prior Marriages		
None	27	75.0
One	5	13.9
Two	2	5.6
Therapy		
None	28	77.8
Current	2	5.6
Previous	6	16.7

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std.Dev.</u>	<u>Range</u>
Age	37.2	13.7	24.0-88.0 (64.0)
Years Married	7.3	7.0	1.0-31.0 (30.0)
Income	61.2K	31.4K	14K-150K (136K)
Dyadic Adjustment	102.2	12.1	75.0-125.0 (50.0)

TABLE 2

Summary of Coding Instructions and Definition

The coder's attention must remain on the resolution of the disagreement between the couple. Other problems (e.g. problems with children) provide a context, but should not become the focus of the coder's attention. Additionally, in resolving problems, not all relevant means are necessarily 'positive' (e.g. a spouse simply giving in to their partner's demands). 'Negative' relevant means may be a legitimate way for a couple to resolve a problem and are therefore coded RM.

Relevant Means (RM) An individual "means" is scored for each discrete step which is effective in enabling the couple to either reach a solution, or overcome an obstacle preventing the couple from reaching a resolution. Relevant means can be scored more than once in a thought unit, although this is usually not the case. A relevant means is scored even if it is a repeat of a previously mentioned means.

Elaboration of Means (EM) An elaboration of means is scored if there are one or more additional details concerning a particular step in the resolution. These details must add clarification or detail to a relevant means with the result of providing a better understanding. The coder must be careful to correctly distinguish between the distinctly separate steps, which are scored as individual means, and elaborations based on those means. Elaborations of means often follow immediately after a relevant means, although they can occur elsewhere including before the relevant means.